

# ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

February 10, 2013

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## Arkansas lawmakers grapple with school choice (Log Cabin Democrat, Conway)

LITTLE ROCK — As Arkansas legislators seek to rewrite the state's school choice law, they must weigh competing proposals over what types of restrictions, if any, ought to be placed on parents who want to transfer their children to a school outside of the district in which they live.

A federal judge last year struck down a 1989 statute as unconstitutional, ruling that Arkansas' Education Department couldn't use race as the only factor that determines whether a student is allowed to transfer. That law sought to prevent "white flight" by barring most transfers where a student wanted to switch into district where a higher percentage of students were of his or her race.

The case is pending before a federal appeals court. In the meantime, education advocates and lawmakers say Arkansas should develop a new law so the fate of transfers isn't left to the courts.

But three different suggestions on how to write the law are complicating the issue. Lawmakers could discuss the school choice proposals as early as next week, when the bills are slated to come before the education committees.

"We want to make it so parents can send their children to schools that fit their needs, not based on their ZIP code," said Laurie Lea, who leads A-Plus Arkansas, a group that advocates unfettered school choice. "We think that opening school choice broadly will help not only turn the tide of the education system but also bring parents options that create the competition among schools that will create better results."

The group backs a bill by Sen. Johnny Key, R-Mountain Home, that offers the least restrictive school choice option: Letting students transfer to another district as long as it doesn't conflict with any pending desegregation court order.

Sen. Joyce Elliot, D-Little Rock, says that while it would be "optimal" for parents to have free rein over school choice, legislators need to balance that with the obligation to provide equitable education for all students. Under her proposal, individual school districts would be able to exempt themselves from the school choice program if they thought it would be harmful to their district.

"If they see that the implementation of choice is putting them in a position where they are going to segregate their schools, they have the right to appeal to the state Board of Education," she said. "But they have to make that appeal with rationale, with findings, with documentation to back up that's the case."

A third proposal would also place limits on transfers based on how it would affect the percentage of students in a district eligible for the federal free or reduced-price lunch program.

Rep. Kim Hammer, R-Benton, said he chose the criteria because it affects a district's federal funding and would withstand constitutional scrutiny.

"This was the best of my ability to determine the approach that can withstand a constitutional challenge," he said.

The lawsuit that sparked last year's court decision was filed by a group of white parents who sought to transfer their children from Malvern, which is 60 percent white, to Magnet Cove, which is 95 percent white. They argued that they should be allowed to put their children in the schools of their choice without the limits placed on them by the race provision.

The debate over how best to change the school choice law is complicated by Arkansas' history of problems desegregating its schools that has long involved judicial intervention.

The state's largest school district, Little Rock, has argued that it wants to maintain the existing school choice law, including the racial provision, because it is an important tool for achieving desegregation.

Others are concerned about the logistical challenges that accompany loosening school choice restrictions, such as a mass exodus of students from a district.

"The issue is going to affect every district differently," Ron Harder, director of the advocacy team at the Arkansas School Boards Association, said. "Larger districts inherently have more flexibility. If you're a smaller school district that's going to lose a bunch of students and teachers, it's going to have a bigger effect."

Another concern, Harder said, is who should pay for the cost of transporting a student to a school outside of his or her district.

"If you have wealthier students, who could afford a car, for instance, they could get to their receiving school, and it probably wouldn't be an issue," he said. "But for students who don't have those means, it could be unequal and that could leave schools open to litigation."

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### **Ex-school employee pleads guilty (Van Buren County Democrat)**

A former Clinton School District employee is heading for prison.

Kevin A. Widener, 35, accepted a plea deal on a charge of sexual assault-second degree in Van Buren County Circuit Court last week. He was sentenced to 48 months in the Arkansas Department of Correction and 60 months suspended.

Widener, who worked for the school district but was not a teacher, was accused of pulling an underage girl out of class and assaulting her in a boys' restroom. He was charged with sexual assault-second degree in April 2012.

The case of another former Clinton school employee was set for plea on April 1. Lance Campbell, 31, was charged last May with sexual assault-first degree in a case involving an underage girl. In June, he was charged with possessing material depicting child sex. At the time of his arrest, Campbell was a junior high school coach and teacher at Clinton.

Also in Judge Charles E. Clawson's courtroom Tuesday:

- Rosendo Ross Meek, 27, was set for pretrial on May 30. Meek charged with criminal trespass and manslaughter. He is accused of punching Clinton businessman and attorney Brett Blakney in May 2012 outside

Blakney's downtown restaurant. Blakney died several hours later in the emergency room of Ozark Health Medical Center.

- Local businessman Steven R. Nunley, 52, requested a jury trial in his case. He was charged in October with possession of drug paraphernalia-meth cocaine. Clawson set a trial date of Aug. 13, 2013, for Nunley.

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### **Parents of Kids with Dyslexia Taking Fight to Capitol (KARK, Channel 4)**

A group of parents are taking the fight for their dyslexic children to the capitol.

Many say there are not enough resources in Arkansas schools, and children are being left behind.

Senate Bill 33, if passed, would mean students would have a chance to get screened for dyslexia between kindergarten and the second grade.

As many parents know first hand, early detection can make all the difference in a child's education.

On Friday night a group of passionate parents met to share how much dyslexia has impacted their families.

Their children showed signs like delayed speech, and some had trouble tying their shoes or learning how to read before they were identified as dyslexic.

Many found their school's teachers didn't know much about the learning disability, let alone how to help remediate their children.

Some say their kids have even spent years in special education classes when they just needed a different teaching approach.

These parents are hoping the bill will help all families detect and remediate earlier.

"It shouldn't be because you're rich enough or good-looking enough or say the right thing and are articulate, it should be a free and appropriate free education for every child," says parent Kim Head.

Senate Bill 33 is waiting to be introduced to a Senate Education Committee.

If passed, it would mandate professional development for educators and more training for education students.

After the bill failed in 2011, parents are trying to raise as much awareness as possible so that doesn't happen again.

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### **Calendar (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

LITTLE ROCK — This is a calendar of public events of the 89th General Assembly for Monday, the 29th day of the 2013 legislative session.

## HOUSE

1:30 p.m. House convenes

## SENATE

1:30 p.m. Senate convenes 10 minutes after adjournment. Transportation, Technology and Legislative Affairs Committee, Room 309

## ALSO

10 a.m. Joint Public Retirement and Social Security Programs, Room 130 11 a.m. Legislative Black Caucus, Room 149

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### **Legislative summary (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)**

LITTLE ROCK — This is a summary list of bills (by bill number, lead sponsor and title) introduced through Friday in the 89th General Assembly, except for appropriation bills, which, along with other bills and resolutions, may be found at the legislative website: [www.arkleg.state.ar.us](http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us)

## HOUSE

HB1281, Shepherd - An act to amend the sales and use tax exemption for certain machinery and equipment.

HB1282, J. Edwards - To modify certain eminent domain laws that arise out of property rights secured under Article 2, Arkansas Code Annotated 22 of the Arkansas Constitution.

HB1283, House - To protect a service member's last vote; to allow a vote cast by absentee ballot before the death of a voter to be counted; and to repeal a portion of the absentee ballot law.

HB1284, Murdock - To amend the laws concerning the carrying of a concealed handgun in a church or other place of worship; to extend statutory charitable immunity to a church or other place of worship; and to declare an emergency.

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